

# **BARRINGTON WATSON PROPERTY AD-HOC DEVELOPMENT COMMITTEE**

## **MEETING MINUTES**

Regular Meeting

7:00 p.m. Wednesday, December 15, 2021

***In Person Meeting, Council Chambers at 283 County Road, Barrington, RI 02806***

### **1. Call to Order and Confirm Quorum**

Chair Hervey called the meeting to order at 7:04 p.m.

*In attendance:* Matt Amaral, David Beal, Kathleen Berard, Christopher Brady (Housing Board of Trustees Alternate), Annelise Conway, Carla DeStefano, Kelly Chinnners Reiss, Jordan Durham, Phil Hervey, Susan McCalmont, Ted Myatt, Erin Paquette, Roni Phipps, and Fletch Thomson

*Absent:* Lynne Carter (Resilience and Energy Committee Alternate); Thomas Peck

*Also in attendance:* Isabelle Gillibrand, Clerk to the Watson Ad-Hoc Committee

### **2. Approve Meeting Minutes – November 15, 2021**

***MOTION: Member McCalmont made a motion to approve the minutes of the November 15, 2021, meeting. Member Chinnners Reiss seconded the motion and it carried unanimously, with Member Brady abstaining.***

### **3. Committee Member Introductions**

Each member introduced themselves, followed by the consultants (Ashley Iannuccilli, landscape architect; Eric Army, Signal Works Architecture; Keelia Kentor, planner).

### **4. Visioning Session**

#### **a. Review Proposed Project Site**

Kentor gave a brief background of the property, including the Town's acquisition and an overview of the structure and property.

#### **b. Recap of Visioning Kickoff meeting**

Kentor summarized the input from the Committee provided at the November 15<sup>th</sup> meeting, including:

#### **➤ Critical Issues:**

- Limited open athletic space, affordable housing, walkability and bikeability, community inclusiveness, sea-rise and coastal erosion concerns, taxes, lack of businesses in town, schools, density, schools, and the outdated power grid.

- Strengths:
  - Quiet, residential, family neighborhood, child-friendliness, small-town feel, strong town balance sheets, engaged and active community, the schools, the coastline and beaches, the bike path, and proximity to Providence and other areas.
- Challenges:
  - Sea-rise and coastal erosion, defining the Town's role in development, lack of senior housing and community recreational facilities, limited open space, Watson Avenue is a narrow road, taxes, limited housing stock, differing opinions in community, access to beach requires off-site improvements, beachgoers leaving trash, "Not In My Backyard" mentality, "landlocked" with limited room for development, and limited appetite for affordable housing.
- Opportunities:
  - Balancing community needs with environmental impacts, affordable senior housing, affordable housing for all, access for the public to the site, meeting the Town's most pressing needs, bringing people together, potential for a community center, open and green space, view corridor preservation, improving building aesthetics, educational facility partnership with the local university, hangout space for children, coordinate with Zion's plans, Cemetery Commission review of the site, implementing creative ways to reduce energy, and reviewing housing trends
- Goals:
  - Create an asset that improves Town for the long term, balance community needs with financial impact, build consensus, reflect on community input, incorporating public access, preserve access to ocean; diversity, equity, and inclusion; ensure balanced traffic impact with public use, identify best use, creating housing along with open space and education opportunities, and meet the needs of seniors
- Success Factors:
  - Preserve open space, receive buy-in from abutters and stakeholders, create a development compatible with neighborhood's character, ensure the outcomes meet expectations, reuse existing structure, create affordable senior housing, address needs of community, financial feasibility, consider neighborhood values.

Kentor reviewed the top results of the vote-by-sticky dot exercise and categories from the first meeting, including creating a community resource, addressing community housing needs, building consensus, preserving and enhancing the existing community character, maximizing financial benefit to the Town, minimizing environmental impacts, promoting appropriate development, improving local infrastructure, creating resources for kids, supporting institutional partnerships.

### **c. Interactive Discussion**

Kentor read out the critical issues from the screen and opened the presentation up for discussion.

Hiba Aswad, 277 Nayatt Road, asked about the accessibility in the existing building in terms of being ADA compliant and accessibility for people aged 55 and over.

Debra Nyser, 30 Adelaide Avenue, asked about the preservation of the building, and noted that her understanding was that the building had to be preserved from the vote at the Financial Town Meeting. Chair Hervey clarified that proceeding with tear-down would require a vote at the next Financial Town Meeting.

David Butera, 275 Nayatt Road, asked why sea-level rise and coastal erosion were on the list of concerns. Kentor noted that although the property is not in the flood zone, there was concern about climate change and being mindful of such with the development. Member Thomson commented that the comment referred to looking at uses of the property and if there is an opportunity to make the property a use that would be protected if other areas of Town were hit by climate change effects.

Edward Hawrot, 6 Watson Avenue, noted that the project could create erosion problems.

Nyser asked about having an abutter representative on the Committee and said she was concerned that no immediate abutter was asked to serve. Chair Hervey noted that the Committee was established by current Town Manager Cunha and the Town Council, and suggested she submit a notice in writing outlining the concerns to the Council. Nyser reiterated that no one in the area was informed of the committee. Chair Hervey said he will reach out to Council President Carroll.

Scott Nyser, 30 Adelaide Avenue, expressed concern about no one from immediate community on being on the Committee, and how the first meeting had already taken place without proper representation. Debra Nyser gave context about the purchase of the Monastery, commenting that she only learned about the vote on the purchase days before the 2021 Financial Town Meeting.

Member Berard commented how she sees this process as a huge opportunity for the community as it allows more control than a developer, which would not allow much input from the Town.

Member Beal concurred, commenting that if the Town did not purchase the property that they would have little say in the outcome. Debra Nyser expressed how she felt when it comes to the voting on the Committee that the immediate abutters do not have a say. Member Durham noted how he was from the neighborhood as well, adding that he received an abutter's notice for the hearing. Nora Aswad, 277 Nayatt Road, commented that she believed it is necessary to add four more people from the community to the Committee. Chair Hervey said he would talk to the Town Council President and have a follow up.

Edward Hawrot, 6 Watson Avenue, wanted to add sewer and water as well as outdated power grid to the list of concerns.

Member Brady said that at the Financial Town Meeting the opportunity to build housing on the site was emphasized prior to the vote, which is important to keep in mind. Barbara Niekerk, 5 Crestwood Road, expressed concern that the motion to purchase passed by only one vote. Debra Nyser commented housing was only a small part of the discussion. James Egan, 50 Watson Avenue, wanted to focus on what the Town and its residents could accomplish rather than relitigate the Financial Town Meeting.

Steve Lister, 19 Payne Road, expressed concern with kids going down to the beach at night. He said if the parking lot at 25 Watson is going to be public property the area could become an extension of Barrington Beach. Debra Nyser also elicited concern that the beach access by Watson Avenue has in

the past created a public nuisance, been a spot for underage drinking, and current it is not safe access.

Scott Nyser asked the consultants what development would have the lowest impact on the immediate community. Kentor said this session is part of the research to narrow scenarios and get most accurate and relevant research as possible. Chair Hervey said this group would not be vetoing any options, and that this is one meeting in a series of meetings. Eric Army elaborated on this, noting how this is the discovery phase of getting public feedback and input about what they want to see in the neighborhood. Army reviewed that the next steps are to organize, bring the data and information back to the Committee and the Council to accept the findings, and then the process will be going through design exercises. Army clarified that Signal Works and the consulting team is not developing the property themselves, rather providing examples to the Committee and the Town to set a scope for the future project so it is cohesive with what the community wants. He also noted the economic development portion of the research and planning is happening as well. Scott Nyser asked how the Town chose the consulting team. Chair Hervey explained how an RFP was put out, the Town received three proposals, and a recommendation was made and approved by the Town Council.

Kentor clarified that this meeting was for feedback only, not design. Ian Burgess, 33 Adelaide, commented how he believes the building is unappealing and does not mind if it is torn down, appreciates the Town wanting the neighborhood's feedback, and how the Town should add other members from the abutting neighborhood. Burgess felt the density of usage of the building should not change as it he believed he fundamentally goes against what was voted on at Financial Town Meeting.

Hiba Aswad noted concern with a lack of community centers in Barrington and how that does not allow for a lot of activities for youths outside of school. She proposed that a portion of the re-use of the property could go to holding classes and events, such as art and wellness. Aswad commented on wildlife that live near and on the property of the Monastery, and she proposed that the wildlife be respected and preserved in the process. Aswad said she is concerned about safety and traffic, adding that there is an opportunity to preserve the chapel's stained glass if available.

Hawrot echoed Burgess's statement and the priority of the density not significantly changing.

Butera commented how he was supportive of more immediate residents on the Committee, reiterated how the Financial Town Meeting vote he thought was on housing for 55 years or older with some, and believed that was what the focus should be on.

Debra Nyser, believed they should research the history of the monastery, which is important to the context of the neighborhood.

Lister asked if any parameters have been set since the Financial Town Meeting, such as a knock-down of the building, expansion, or otherwise. Chair Hervey noted that general principles were brought up at Financial Town Meeting and that vote was the starting point of the conversation; however, if through the process it is not economically feasible, principles like whether to preserve or tear-down the building would need to be revisited. Lister commented how he wished the discussion had been more forthright in terms of maintaining integrity of the building.

Loredana Lister, 19 Payne Road, noted that many people walk the neighborhood, emphasizing the importance of children's safety and walkability, and described current traffic conditions within the neighborhood.

Egan expressed concern over density, asking if anyone on the Committee in favor of higher density could give a rough idea of their vision. Kentor noted that is not a feasible request at this phase as they need to understand the larger components first before getting into the details. Member Berard and Chair Hervey reviewed current zoning standards for a R-40 lot, and how much is in favor of a developer. Chair Hervey explained how the Comprehensive Permit process can override local zoning, citing a proposed development on George Street as an example.

Melissa Horne, 45 Appian Way and a representative of the Barrington Land Conservation Trust, explained how she litigated on the George Street development, which she commented was a losing proposition. She viewed this visioning session as an opportunity and commented how she does not think its beneficial to make assumptions of a pre-determined use of property, but rather public is here to talk about all the possibilities of the property and focus on positive use. Horne commented how she would love to see a portion used for conservation and wants to maximize the use of the property for all in Town. Nora Aswad asked what to do with the remainder of the property that is swamp-like, asking about a geological study.

Member Beal asked what the residents want in their neighborhood. Mary Grenier, 10 Watson Avenue, noted the virtual survey from the Town should be used and considered. Member Myatt noted it was used in the initial kickoff. Chair Hervey noted the results are also available on the Town website.

Grenier then proposed the idea of the property being an education center about the Bay. Member Beal noted the Town does not need to make money off the property, so it is an idea to consider. Hiba Aswad concurred with the idea, noting the estuary and wetlands in the area, especially with the growing climate change concerns.

Debra Nyser noted that the neighborhood had been through a lot of changes recently, including the Rhode Island School of Design locking their gates to public access, the litigation with their Air BnB on Freemont Avenue, illegal parking occurring in their neighborhood, and then the contentious purchase of the Monastery. Nyser felt the neighborhood has been hit with these issues and people are frustrated because there is nothing concrete in place.

Nora Nirk, 4 Watson Avenue, commented that she believed mixed use would be a great solution, thanked the neighbors for their heartfelt comments and insight, and asked how long the process will be. Chair Hervey explained how the Town does not want to own the property for long, so the goal is to clear up issues at Financial Town Meeting in May 2022, make Comprehensive Plan amendments with Planning Board and Council approval, and then put it out an RFP which is about a several-month process. He noted that for sale of Town property, there may have to be another Financial Town Meeting scheduled in 2022. He commented that once an agreement is made with a developer there will be more planning and public input involved. Hiba Aswad asked what type of buyers the Town is considering, and Chair Hervey explained it will be determined through this process.

Butera suggested that if the Town does not need to recoup their money, the property could go towards recreation. Hervey said there could be public space within the project. Member Durham clarified there is no proposal yet, rather the consulting team and Committee planned to solicit ideas on how consultant team can help draft an RFP.

Laura Young, 14 Manor Road, commented on interest in senior housing. Young explained how she was a part of the Age-Friendly Barrington focus groups and survey, and from that found that seniors in Town were looking for multi-generational and accessible housing, not necessarily only seniors.

Nora Aswad emphasized the importance of maintaining the value of the surrounding homes and neighborhood, and this project could be financially detrimental to the surrounding community.

Arlene McAuley, 26 Adelaide Avenue, asked what the takeaway is so far. Member DeStefano commented how none of the concerns were a surprise, and that the Committee members signed up to hear everything, assimilate the information, and create a plan. Kentor reviewed that her takeaways:

- The housing development needs to be contextual to the neighborhood
- Many are concerned with an increase of density on the property.
- The project needs to be cautious about how the coastline is treated as a resource, and that it cannot be an extension of Barrington Beach.

Niekerk added that the plan needs to consider parking due to the closing of RISD's lot. Chair Hervey clarified that the on-street parking issue is being evaluated, but nothing has been decided yet. Loredana Lister asked about RISD's lot and the opportunity to open it back up to the public. Chair Hervey discussed the parking further.

#### **d. Discuss Next Steps**

Army gave a brief timeline of the next steps, including further information and discovery at the January meetings and development of design concepts in February.

### **5. Adjourn**

***MOTION: Member Brady made a motion to adjourn at 9:00 p.m.; the Committee voted to adjourn.***